

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 147379

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: CG, SHUM

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS: DRAFT COUNTRY ACTION PLAN

REF: STATE 139160

1. THE FOLLOWING DRAFT COUNTRY ACTION PLAN ON HUMAN RIGHTS FOR GABON WAS PREPARED IN AF/C AND IS FORWARDED FOR EMBASSY COMMENT. SINCE REPORT WAS PREPARED AFTER DEPARTURE OF DESK OFFICER, IT IS SUBMITTED WITH DUE APOLOGIES FOR ANY DISTORTIONS OF FACT. AS PRESENT REQUIREMENTS CALL FOR SUBMISSION OF THE FINAL ACTION PLAN ON JULY 1, EMBASSY LIBREVILLE IS REQUIRED TO SUBMIT ITS CONTENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY COB JUNE 29.

2. QUOTE:

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNTRY ACTION PLAN

-- GABON

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 STATE 147379

A. CONDITION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN GABON

THE PREAMBLE OF THE CONSTITUTION AFFIRMS THE DEDICATION OF THE GABONESE PEOPLE TO BOTH THE 17;9 FRENCH DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS. THESE PRINCIPLES ARE GUARANTEED IN TITLE I OF THE CONSTITUTION. WHILE THERE ARE CERTAINLY INSTANCES OF VIOLATIONS OF THESE HUMAN RIGHTS IN GABON, THEY ARE THE RESULT PRIMARILY OF ARBITRARY BEHAVIOR ON THE PART OF INDIVIDUAL

OFFICIALS AND ARE NOT REFLECTION OF GOVERNMENT POLICY.

A. THERE IS LITTLE IF ANY EVIDENCE OF TORTURE OR CRUEL,INHUMANE OR DEGRADING PUNISHMENT BEING ADMINISTERED TO PRISONERS AS A MATTER OF GOVERNMENTAL POLICY. WHERE PHYSICAL ABUSEOCCURS, IT IS THE EXCEPTION RATHER THAN THE RULE AND IS GENERALLY TRACEABLE TO UNEDUCATED, ARBITRARY POLICE OFFICERS AND JAILERS. ON THE OTHER HAND, PHYSICAL CONDITIONS IN THE JAILS LEAVE MUCH TO BE DESIRED.

B. ARBITRARY ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT IS QUITE RARE. POLITICAL DETENTIONS OCCUR BUT THE PRACTICE DOES NOT APPEAR WIDESPREAD OR SYSTEMATIC. THERE DO NOT APPEAR TO BE PERSONS SUFFERING PROLONGED DETENTION EXCEPT AS A RESULT OF LEGAL JUDGMENT. TO HANDLE THOSE SUSPECTED OF DISLOYALTY, PRESIDENT BONGO HAS RESORTED TO SUCH DEVICES AS GENERAL CONFINEMENT TO AN AREA OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL (MAISON SURVEILLE) OR IN THE CASE OF ONE FORMER COUNSELOR AT THE PRESIDENCY DEMOTION AND A REFUSAL TO ALLOW HIM TO TRAVEL ABROAD, PRESUMABLY TO AVOID HAVING HIM BECOME A FOCUS THERE FOR OPPOSITION ACTIVITY. IN CONTRAST TO HSS
CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 STATE 147379

PREDECESSOR, PRESIDENT BONGO HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN NEUTRALIZING THE OPPOSITION BY COOPTING ITS MEMBERS. IN A COUNTRY AS RICH AND UNDER-POPULATED AS GABON, THERE IS LITTLE OF THE MISERY AND DISSATISFACTION WHICH BREEDS AN ACTIVE OPPOSITION IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

C. INVASION OF THE HOME IS EXTREMELY RARE.

2. RESPECT FOR CIVIL AND POLITICAL LIBERTIES

BY AFRICAN STANDARDS, GABON IS A QUITE LIBERAL COUNTRY. THE LARGE NUMBER OF FOREIGNERS (MOSTLY FRENCH) IN PRIVATE BUSINESS AND THEIR PERVASIVE PRESENCE AS "CONSEILLERS" IN THE ADMINISTRATION ALSO PROVIDE A LIBERALIZING INFLUENCE. PRESIDENT BONGO REMAINS, HOWEVER, AUTOCRATIC IN HIS RULE AND DISINCLINED TO SHARE POWER.

A. THERE ARE NO PARTICULAR RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF THOUGHT OR AN ORGANIZED EFFORT TO BRAIN-WASH THE POPULATION, USING THE SINGLE PARTY AS A TRANSMISSION BELT FOR BONGO'S POLICIES AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY. THIS DOES NOT MEAN, HOWEVER, THAT THERE IS THE FREE CLASH OF OPINION AND POLITICAL JUDGMENT IN GABON THAT ONE WOULD FIND IN EUROPE OR THE UNITED STATES. BONGO IS SUSPICIOUS OF COMMUNIST INFLUENCES AND THERE IS SPOT CENSORSHIP OF PUBLICATIONS COMING INTO THE COUNTRY. BONGO

REMAINS A HIGHLY ENERGETIC, AUTOCRATIC LEADER WHO DOES NOT TAKE LIGHTLY A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO HIS VIEWS OR POLICIES. BUT THE PRAGMATIC, UNIDEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THE GABONESE, COMBINED WITH A RATHER APATHETIC AND NON-COMBATIVE DISPOSITION, ENCOURAGES CONFORMITY RATHER THAN POLITICAL FERMENT. LIKE OTHER AFRICAN LEADERS, BONGO HAS CHANGED HIS RELIGION FROM CATHOLICISM TO ISLAM TO IMPROVE HIS POCKETBOOK, BUT HE IS NO FANATIC AND THERE ARE NO RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 STATE 147379

PRATICE OR MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN GABON. WHILE THERE ARE ALSO NO RESTRICTIONS ON THE RIGHT OF ASSEMBLY, THE EXISTENCE OF A SINGLE POLITICAL PARTY AND GOVERNMENT-APPROVED LABOR FEDERATION MEANS, THAT IN PRACTICE, ALL ASSEMBLIES FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES ABOVE THE VILLAGE LEVEL HAS A-PRIORI GOVERNMENT APPROVAL.

B. THERE ARE NO SIGNIFICANT RESTRICTIONS ON THE FREEDOM ON MOVEMENT BUT, AS NOTED ABOVE, THE GOVERNMENT WILL OCCASIONALLY PLACE OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS WHOM THEY DO NOT WISH TO SEE LEAVE THE COUNTRY.

C. GABON IS A ONE PARTY STATE BY LAW AND THERE IS NO DEMOCRATIC PROCESS ASSURING PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE, HOWEVER, THE SMALL POPULATION, CORRESPONDING LACK OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND CLOSE COMMUNITY MEAN THAT MOST CITIZENS WITH ANY EDUCATION HAVE JOBS IN MINISTRIES OR PRIVATE INDUSTRY WHICH PROVIDE SOME AT LEAST SECOND HAND INVOLVEMENT IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS. THE POLICY-MAKING CIRCLE AROUND BONGO IS OF COURSE QUITE SMALL.

3. TRENDS IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY

WITH ITS ENORMOUS MINERAL AND TIMBER RESOURCES (OIL, MAGANESE, URANIUM, UNEXPLOITED IRON ORE ETC.)

AND ITS POPULATION OF UNDER ONE MILLION, GABON IS A POTENTIAL KUWAIT OF CENTRAL AFRICA. THE FACT THAT GABON IS SO RICH, HAS LEAD TO DISTORTIONS IN ECONOMIC POLICY WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS ONLY NOW BEGUN TO ADDRESS. GIVEN ITS SUBSTANTIAL FOREIGN EXCHANGE EARNINGS, GABON HAS TENDED TO IMPORT VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 05 STATE 147379

IT NEEDS FROM FRANCE. AN INCREASINGLY URBAN POPULATION HAS LEARNED TO LIVE OFF OF IMPORTED FOOD STUFFS AT INFLATED PRICES BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE NO EFFORT TO DEVELOP GABONESE AGRICULTURE. EARLIER

GABONESE CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICULARLY THE MINERAL WEALTH OF THE COUNTRY. IN THE PAST YEAR, HOWEVER, BONGO HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY AWARE OF THE NEED TO REDUCE FOOD IMPORTS AND IMPROVE THE NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS OF THE POPULATION BY PROMOTING DOMESTIC AGRICULTURE. RELATIVE TO THE WEALTH OF GABON, THERE ARE AREAS OF OBVIOUS AND SERIOUS NEGLECT OF THE POPULATION EVEN IN LIBREVILLE (E.G, SOME SECTORS OF THE TOWN ARE WITHOUT WATER AND PAVED STREETS). BUT RELATIVE TO MOST OTHER AFRICAN STATES, THE AVERAGE GABONESE LIVES PRETTY WELL.

4. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT FOR VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN GABON IS MIXED. THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION AND SOPHISTICATION OF LOCAL OFFICIALS IS USUALLY LOW AND ARBITRARY AND CAPRICIOUS ACTIONS CERTAINLY TAKE PLACE, OFTEN WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF LIBREVILLE. THIS IS NOT A REFLECTION OF A MALEVOLENT GOVERNMENT POLICY BUT OF INADEQUATE CADRES AND INSTITUTIONS. BONGO DOES NOT PRETEND HE IS A EUROPEAN-STYLE DEMOCRAT. HE IS KNOWN TO REACT VERY VIGOROUSLY AND EVEN ARBITRARILY TO INCIDENTS WHICH HE BELIEVES REFLECT ON HIS PERSON OR WHICH HAVE A RACIST OVERTONE. FRENCH CITIZENS WHO HAVE DISPLEASED LOCAL OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED AND EXPELLED ON 24 HOURS NOTICE. BUT THE RULE OF LAW GENERALLY APPEARS TO BE FOLLOWED IN GABON.

THE GOVERNMENT SHARES RESPONSIBILITY FOR MISMANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY WITH ITS MANY FRENCH ADVISERS WHO TEND TO BELIEVE THAT WHAT IS GOOD FOR CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 06 STATE 147379

FRENCH BUSINESS IS GOOD FOR GABON. BY OUR STANDARDS, THE PALACES BUILT FOR THE OAU SUMMIT IN JULY 1977, THE FORMATION OF A SEPARATE AIR GABON, AND THE REPEATED TRIPS TO THE US BY THE BONGOS AND THEIR MINISTERS REPRESENT LUXURIES, AND GABON WOULD DO BETTER TO SPEND THE MONEY ON RAISING THE LIVING STANDARDS OF THE

PEOPLE. THIS CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IS VERY AFRICAN HOWEVER, AND GABON CAN CERTAINLY AFFORD IT BETTER THAN MOST COUNTRIES; ALTHOUGH IT BORDERS AT TIMES ON BLATANT CORRUPTION.

5. COOPERATION WITH INVESTIGATION

THE ISSUE OF AN OUTSIDE INVESTIGATION TO LOOK INTO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS HAS NOT PRESENTED ITSELF IN GABON, AND THERE IS NO PARTICULAR REASON FOR SUCH AN INVESTIGATION. GIVEN HIS SENSE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGN ADVISERS, WE MAY ASSUME

BONGO WOULD MAKE SOME ATTEMPT TO ACCOMMODATE A PROPOSAL FOR OUTSIDE INVESTIGATION. HE DOES NOT TOLERATE CRITICISM EASILY, HOWEVER, AND WOULD BE INCLINED TO BE NON-COOPERATIVE OR EXPEL ANYONE WHO CRITICIZED HIS RULE OR GOT UNDER HIS SKIN.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SIX-MONTH TIME FRAME

SINCE MOST HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN GABON ARE OF LONGER-TERM ECONOMIC OR SOCIAL NATURE, REMEDY DOES NOT LEND ITSELF TO A SHORT TIME FRAME.

2. TWELVE MONTH TIME FRAME

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 07 STATE 147379

OUR PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVE DURING THIS PERIOD SHOULD BE TO REINFORCE THE EFFORTS OF THOSE MINISTERS AND ADVISERS WHO WOULD HAVE BONGO REDUCE HIS HEAVY BORROWING FOR LARGE INDUSTRIAL PROJECTS AND INCREASE HIS INVESTMENT IN THE AGRICULTURAL AND SOCIAL SECTORS. SINCE WE ARE PRESENTLY RECRUITING AN AMERICAN ECONOMIC ADVISER TO SERVE IN THE PRESIDENCY, AT BONGO'S REQUEST, WE WILL BE IN A BETTER POSITION IN THE COMING YEAR TO EXERT A QUIET HELPFUL INFLUENCE IN MATTERS OF ECONOMIC POLICY. SINCE GABON IS TOO WEALTHY FOR US TO JUSTIFY A PROGRAM OF AID ASSISTANCE, WE DO NOT HAVE ANY MEANS OF DIRECT ENCOURAGEMENT OF GABON'S AGRICULTURE. IN GENERAL, HUMAN RIGHTS IS NOT A SERIOUS PROBLEM IN GABON AND AN ACTION PROGRAM IS THEREFORE NOT A HIGH PRIORITY.

REACTION IN THE HOST COUNTRY

BONGO IS PREPARED TO DISCUSS THE PROBLEMS OF GABON QUITE OPENLY EVEN IF HE REACTS WITH SOME IRRITATION

TO DIRECT CRITICISM. IT IS POSSIBLE, THEREFORE, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE AN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT POLICY. WE WOULD HOPE THAT ANY AMERICAN ECONOMIC ADVISER IN THE PRESIDENCY WILL BE ABLE TO EXERT A USEFUL INFLUENCE WITHOUT STEPPING ON TOO MANY TOES AND CAUSING A BACK LASH. GABONESE OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN PLEASED IN THE PAST WHEN FOREIGNERS HAVE ENCOURAGED BONGO TO UNDERTAKE THESE SORTS OF ECONOMIC REFORMS WHICH THEY HAVE BEEN PUSHING. IN THE AREA OF POLITICAL REFORMS, THERE HAVE BEEN CHANGES WHICH ARE CONCEIVABLY TRACEABLE TO INVESTIGATION BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. IN ITS 1975-76 REPORT, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S NOTED PROGRESS IN THE CASE OF 16 PERSONS WHO HAD BEEN WITHOUT TRIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 08 STATE 147379

SINCE 1972. THEY WERE FINALLY TRIED IN JUNE, 1975;
AND 7 WERE CONVICTED AND SENTENCED TO PRISON TERMS.
ON 31 DECEMBER 1975, HOWEVER, THERE WAS A GENERAL
AMNESTY IN WHICH ALL PRISONERS WERE RELEASED WITH
THE EXCEPTION OF ONE. (COMMENT: PLEASE INDICATE
WHETHER RELEASED).

IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE

THERE IS NO REASON WHY GABON SHOULD NOT MAKE THE
CHANGES IN ECONOMIC POLICY WHICH ARE PRESENTLY BEING
PROPOSED. NOT ONLY IS BONGO APPARENTLY IN FAVOR OF THESE
REFORMS, AT LEAST SO LONG AS HIGHER PRIORITIES DO NOT
INTERVENE, BUT THE FRENCH ALSO ARE PRESSING FOR NEEDED
ECONOMIC REFORMS. AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF ONE OF THE
MINOR TRIBES IN GABON (BATEKE) BONGO HAS ALWAYS BEEN
SENSITIVE TO A NEED FOR ETHNIC AND REGIONAL BALANCE
IN HIS GOVERNMENT. IT MAY BE ASSUMED THEREFORE THAT,
OVER TIME, THE SUBSTANTIAL RESOURCES OF GABON WILL BE
DISTRIBUTED WITH SOME EQUITY AROUND THE COUNTRY, WITH
BONGO'S HOME AREA AROUND FRANCEVILLE, HOWEVER, RECEIVING
DISPROPRIONATE ATTENTION.

IMPACT ON US INTERESTS

HUMAN RIGHTS IS NOT A SERIOUS ISSUE IN OUR RELATIONS,
THE VIOLATIONS IN THE POLITICAL FIELD ARE NOT FLAGRANT,
AND BONGO SEEMS PREPARED TO MAKE NEEDED REFORMS IN THE
ECONOMIC AREA. THERE IS NO REASON, THEREFORE, WHY OUR
HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY SHOULD HAVE ANY ADVERSE SPILL-OVER
ON OUR BROADER INTERESTS IN GABON. CHRISTOPHER

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